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ABSTRACT

Within the past decade there has been an increasing number of portfolios submitted by adult students requesting academic credit for their experiential learning in speech communication. The numbers of portfolios and the institutions accepting them are growing so much that the communication profession should develop policies for their assessment. In contrast with university classroom learning, experiential learning takes place in the context of the "real world," most often on the job. But job experience does not necessarily mean extensive experiential learning, and it is "learning" that is the special concern of a communication department. Most people agree that credit should not be awarded for an experience, but for the actual learning gained. Among the key issues in assessing applications for experientail credit are: (1) establishing a bona fide theoretical base; and (2) documenting the adjudicated and quantified communication experiences. In addition, international implications, particularly variances in cultural values and communication standards need to be considered. Indiana University's (IU) School of Continuing Studies has designed a system for portfolio evaluation. The IU portfolio, a refinement of the Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning project model, consists of 4 parts: (1) the resume, which contains persuasive groupings of life experiences that can equate the college-level learning; (2) cluster pages, which draw items of nearly any form or type and from any source that can demonstrate course equivalency through experiential learning; (3) a request for credit, which involves a brief capsulization of why a certain number and level of credits should be assigned; and (4) an appendix. (Seventeen references are attached.) (PRA)

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ASSESSING SELF-ACQUIRED COMPETENCY PORTFOLIOS IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

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Abstract
of
ASSESSING SELF-ACQUIRED COMPETENCY PORTFOLIOS IN SPEECH COMMUNICATION: NATIONAL AND INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

This article acknowledges the increasing number of portfolios submitted by adult students requesting academic credit for their experiential learning in speech communication. It sets forth general concerns in assessing applications. Among the key issues are (1) establishing a bona fide theoretical base, and (2) documenting the adjudicated and quantified communication experiences. Further consideration is given to international implications, particularly variances in cultural values and communication standards.

INTRODUCTION

Through the years there have been various "testing-out" procedures for assigning credit for basic course requirements in special cases. Often in speech communication we encountered traditional freshmen who had extensive speech training in high school, especially in debate and forensics, and thus requested alternative treatment. Occasionally these cases were problematic in that these students appeared to have outstanding fluency and flair while saying little or nothing. They were long on delivery and short on rhetorical form or content. Those situations were somewhat rare and could be handled with a few ad hoc procedures.

But, within the past decade, there has been a significant increase in the number of adults who are beginning or returning to degree programs, and "the question of being granted college credit for experiential learning . . . has become a more prominent concern" (Hengesbach, 1990a, p.7). Indiana University's School of Continuing Studies has designed a system whereby adult students prepare portfolios of their self-acquired competencies and have them assessed by faculty in the departments from which academic credit is requested.

During recent months, our Department has received more and more portfolios from persons with varying degrees of speaking experiences as part of their employment and background. Some supplement their experience with in-service communication training, nonaccredited workshops and seminars, Dale Carnegie or Toastmaster's involvements both past and

present, and the list goes on. A portfolio even was sent from an ARAMCO administrator in Saudi Arabia. The applicant was initially from India, was educated in the English language, and was in a position which required extensive business and professional communication. One author remembers having Sunday dinner with the applicant when teaching a communication course in Dhahran, some ten years ago. As with every portfolio, this request was for either course-specific credit for our Business and Professional Communication (C223), or alternatively any number of credits judged appropriate under the multiple-credit lower-level block number provided by our School of General Studies, i.e. SGS 299.

The numbers of portfolios and the institutions accepting them are growing so much that the communication profession should develop policies for their assessment. In 1986, the American Council on Education's Division of Policy Analysis and Research published a survey on credit policies for adult learners in higher education. They discovered that credit for what they called "extrainstitutional learning" was granted at the lower division in 94.2% of 1,124 institutions; 40.2% granted upper division credit. Of all the assessment techniques, the most popular was "portfolio assessment," which was applied by 63.7% of them. Other assessment techniques included faculty committee, occupational license or certificate, personal interview, hands-on demonstration, and the like (Hexter & Andersen, 1986). Colleges surveyed "estimated that about 39,700 students were granted 296,300

experiential learning credits, or 8 credits per student, through various means in the 1984-85 academic year" (Hexter & Andersen, 1986, p. 14). Noncollegiate learning included courses offered by the armed services, military occupational proficiency, and courses offered by business and industry. With this overall influx in experiential learning, particularly through portfolio assessment, and prospects for more to come, we began studying the subject in terms of establishing criteria for assigning credit in speech communication.

EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

In contrast with university classroom learning, experiential learning takes place in the context of the "real world." Most often it is on one's job. When a person's job involves speech communication, it frequently is in a focussed, specialized, functional way. It is not uncommon for new hirees to take brief, concentrated in-service communication training as part of the instruction for performing a specialized task and then spend several years in that capacity. That does not necessarily mean extensive experiential learning. There can be repetition of a narrowly applied prescription that involves many "experiences" with minimal "learning." The term learning is our special concern here. And trying to quantify that learning is what makes the task so formidable.

In a 1989 study on the assessment of prior learning, Amy Rose concluded that "proponents of prior learning are united in stressing that, in general, credit should not be awarded for an experience, but only for the actual learning gained. Measuring this learning has become the most difficult aspect of prior learning assessment. This assessment process has been developing continuously since the mid-1970s, and there are now many variations depending on the institution" (Rose, 1989, p. 215). There is a fairly standardized and generally accepted body of knowledge on which experiential learning programs are based, and the measurement presents a challenge for all university disciplines. Any student must have a theoretical base. In his handbook for preparers of prior learning portfolios at Indiana University, Theodore Hengesbach admonished readers that, "needing to know a specific answer may make experiential learning less comprehensive and objective than school-sponsored learning. We may be interested only in the answers to a very specific set of questions and not in the underlying principles that support the answers or shed light on an issue's other perspectives" (Hengesbach 1990a, pp. 5-6).

Lack of theory, the theory which is at the heart of university courses, can be one of the greatest shortcomings of experiential learning. This especially presents problems with oral communication courses. People can assume that they have "communicated" all their lives and, therefore, they can go through a university catalogue and select the many subjects

over which they have a "natural" mastery, and on which they feel they have gained a handle during the performance of certain jobs, social roles, activities, or hobbies. By happenstance, or a dedicated amount of trial-and-error they can have learned, and this is admirable, but how does this translate into college credit? In taking university communication courses, whether public speaking, interpersonal communication, interviewing, business and professional communication, or whatever, a person should learn to make choices such as what to say (or not to say), when to say it, and how to say it. To paraphrase Aristotle, one learns how to discover in any particular situation the best available means of communication. In other words, if one gains some fluency, poise, and confidence with oral communication without having a theoretical basis, i.e. a general awareness of the options available, that person has a severely limited grasp. In short, college-level learning in communication, as well as other disciplines, involves generalizable knowledge that can be applied to situations other than those immediately faced.

In his Principles of Good Practice in Assessing Experiential Learning, Willingham concluded that college-level learning must include a "conceptual as well as a practical grasp of the knowledge or competencies required." Moreover, he said, it must be applicable outside the specific context in which it was acquired, and it should be subject matter usually included in the college curriculum (Willingham, 1977).

In the final analysis, academicians and portfolio preparers should not presume that oral communication courses involve simply intuitive skills, or the practice and repeated application of some mechanical prescriptions. Perhaps it is clearer to say that even the most basic university communication courses should involve a baccalaureate level learning, which should not be confused with vocational level learning. While not belittling vocational education, Hengesbach gave the significant distinction: "Vocational learning is knowledge of special procedures and practical ways of performing tasks accurately and efficiently. Baccalaureate level learning is knowledge of basic principles and theories that enable someone to analyze, make judgments, and suggest informed, alternative options, conclusions, and applications" (Hengesbach, 1990a, p. 13).

While an experiential learner should be encouraged to explore all possibilities for credit to be assigned, there is danger in thinking that speech credit should be assigned solely because one did speaking with little or no knowledge of the principles involved. For instance, without an understanding of context, an applicant could misinterpret Hengesbach's Handbook when it says: "A variety of learning can be gained from one experience. A single volunteer activity, for example, might have provided learning experiences in public speaking [italics added], business management, organizational structure, and contemporary social problems" (Hengesbach, 1990a, p. 10).

Indeed, it is good to keep track of such speaking experiences as this. Yet, they must be seen primarily as application of principles affecting both form and delivery in the presentations. Unfortunate as it may be, it is possible for someone to give a certain type of presentation a hundred times and give it poorly each time. Such is more probable if the student has had no study or training in communication, formal or informal.

Practical experience is credit-worthy, under appropriate circumstances, and should be encouraged. The Communication and Theatre Department at I.U., Indianapolis, even has a course for that purpose, i.e. C300: Practicum. Our practicum course is designed to apply learning beyond what is acquired in classroom study. It is open to all students who have taken specific coursework and wish to make a functional application of that material. Projects that can be supervised, quantified, and evaluated are in this bailiwick. It is described in the School Catalog as: "Practical experience in various departmental areas as selected by students prior to registration, outlined in consultation with the instructor, and approved by the Department. Must represent a minimum of 45 clock hours practical experience per credit hour" (Indiana University Bulletin, 1990-1992, p. 45). That course is variable credit and may be repeated up to a total of eight semester hours.

Similarly, we offer internships in Organizational Communication and Telecommunications. They are for seniors

and majors who are in a position to apply after three years of coursework. Qualified applicants gain "experience under auspices of a qualified cooperating organization." As a matter of quality-control, each intern is required to have "periodic meetings with [the] faculty advisor and [write a] term paper detailing . . . professional activities and reactions." (Indiana University Bulletin, 1990-1992, p. 47).

The practicum and internships are given close supervision at the outset and the evaluation task is simplified. But that is not to say that credit cannot retroactively be assigned to experiential learners who apply for credit with portfolios through the School of Continuing Studies. It does mean, however, that such credit only should be granted after the applicants clearly demonstrate in the portfolios that they have met the unique criteria of university-level communication courses either on a course-specific or a "block credit" basis.

PORTFOLIOS

A model for portfolios emerged in the early 1970's by the CAEL project (Cooperative Assessment of Experiential Learning), and it still is in a formative stage, subject to adaptations and changes. All of the other tests and assessment devices notwithstanding, portfolio assessment "has become the assessment technique of choice in prior learning programs as well as the foundation for adult degree programs" (Knapp & Gardiner, 1981, p. 7).

A portfolio serves a function similar to that of a student's transcript. Just as the transcript indicates the student's in-school learning or academic record of courses taken, requirements met, and grades earned, the portfolio should embody the experiential learning counterparts to those elements. It is "a dossier of information that has been assembled about an individual's past experiences and accomplishments. It is the primary vehicle for distilling raw life experiences and accomplishments" (Knapp & Gardiner, 1981, p. 9).

While other supplementary efforts might be requested, such as interviews, speeches, participation in simulated situations such as certain types of interviews or other interpersonal communication, the portfolio should serve as the primary document for assessment. To the portfolio, the applicant could be requested to provide additional information, such as verification or more documentation. In lieu of or to supplement live sample speech communication presentations, the applicant might be asked to furnish videotapes, outlines, or even external authoritative evaluations. These materials are particularly vital when the applicant is a great distance from the assessment location.

The Indiana University portfolio, a refinement of the initial CAEL model, consists of four parts: Resume, Cluster Pages, Request for Credit, and Appendix. Each of these parts will be discussed in terms of suggestions and implications for assessment in speech communication.

RESUME. An effective portfolio resume should contain persuasive groupings of life experiences that can equate the college-level learning for which regular academic credit can be assigned. It is structured in ways to encourage assessors to conclude that experiential learning has occurred. Just as in a job resume, there will be a chronological list of education, special training (e.g. in-service training, workshops, seminars), and employment. Unlike job resumes, these might also feature religious or social or other kinds of activities, or even hobbies that would require acquisition and/or application of communication skills.

CLUSTER PAGES. For each course the applicant requests equivalency credit, there is a "cluster page," so called because it draws items of nearly any form or type and from any source that can demonstrate course equivalency through experiential learning. Indiana instructs that the cluster page include:

1. The subject or title of the course in the curriculum that identifies the learning equivalency. At this point the applicant will have studied the catalog description and determined which experiences in employment and/or special training and/or activities, and whatever, listed on the resume. might be combined the most effectively to equate all or the most sizeable portion of the course description.

   To expedite this process, and make it more efficient for student preparers, departmental liaisons might

encourage the students and/or their advisors to explore the communication curriculum with them. And, the experiential learning programs might even study representative syllabi and textbooks so they could give more concrete advice at this vital formative stage of portfolio preparation.

For instance, except for some extremely fundamental lower-level courses, the experiential learning probably could not match all the special-units of many curricular offerings on a course-specific basis. However, many curricula have "variable title" or "topics" courses which give more flexibility to what might be creditable. There are at least three such courses in our curriculum. One which readily comes to mind is C125: Topics in Communication and Theatre--this is a one to three hour course featuring "select introductory theory and practice in specialized and/or consolidated areas of communication."

2. From those in various categories on the resume, there is a list of the experiences from which the learning is derived. This is the crucial point for a speech communication applicant. These entries will need to be credible, documentable vehicles for learning the theory and, where appropriate, applying it. The case for the experiential credit is articulated here, and documented in the Appendix. Possibly unlike any other discipline, communication has a plethora of unaccredited

organizations and individuals who claim expertise in a multitude of communication areas. The precautions to be heeded by communication portfolio assessors will be discussed under the "Documentation" portion of this section.

3. Next are four or five "learning statements" that assert the level of knowledge or skill the applicant has of the subject. For instance, in response to the description of a basic public speaking course, some learning statements might be:

   a. I know the principles and can apply the techniques of audience analysis for a public speech in terms of audience-centeredness, audience psychology, demographics, and situational dispositions--I can do this excellently and successfully.

   b. I know the principles and can apply the techniques of organizing and outlining a speech in terms of introductions and conclusions with their subordinate parts and functions. And I can structure the body of a speech with its main points, patterns, supports, and connectives. This has been done effectively in strategic military settings.

   c. I know the theory of and can present speeches (1) to inform about objects, processes, events, and concepts, and (2) to persuade on propositions of fact, value, and policy, using logical, ethical, and emotional methods of persuasion. And I can do this

effectively with audiences of different attitudinal and intellectual levels.

d. I know the theory and can demonstrate excellent delivery in the manuscript and extemporaneous method, with verbal and nonverbal skills. This is done in a highly communicative and refined manner.

4. Last item relating to the cluster page should be a list of documentation for the above--a list for actual documents to be included in the appendices or at least made available upon request. It is here that the person should put affidavits, verifications, and substantive data. If a seminar or workshop was attended, there should be a certificate, diploma or some other verification of successful completion. There should be a syllabus of units covered, an indication of the methods used in teaching and involving the students. There should be some indication of the theoretical materials used and the sources of reading matter. If there is any potential question about the credentials or qualifications of the source, this should be clarified, if it is not evident in the documentation. Even the time factor should be considered.

There have been some bold "communication experts," who claim to do all but jump tall buildings in a single bound, and to do it in a day or on one weekend. While serving as an employee in a State Bureaucratic Organization in Indiana, one author received an advertisement on a powerful, one-day

workshop on "How to Supervise People." It was to spread its wisdom in thirty-four cities in eight midwestern states in one-day sessions during a two-month period. The attendee would participate in programs on eight workshop topics from 9:00 a.m. to 4:00 p.m. One of those topics was "Building Positive Communication Skills." And all of this learning was for the bargain price of $59.00 (Dick & East, 1989). Of course, it cannot be said that absolutely no experiential learning of value can be obtained in one of those but the superficiality can be dangerous.

While the specific amount of time is not always ascertainable in experiential learning, a general gauge has been established. A typical semester hour involves approximately fifteen hours of actual meeting in the classroom and a student is expected to spend some two hours in study outside class for every one hour in class. That is why forty-five hours of practicum work were stipulated for one credit hour in the aforementioned course description. Indiana University's School of Continuing Studies recommends that a semester credit hour be equivalent to 40 to 50 hours of experiential learning (Hengesbach, 1990a).

Crucial items in the documentation list are letters from persons with expertise in communication. These are letters of "verification" more so than "recommendation." If the theory has been obtained in more of an on-the-job training context than from the more formal nonaccredited workshops or seminars, then assessors should have some way of knowing how

knowledgeable the colleague-trainer is. Occasionally the trainer has had formal training sessions or regular academic training in a communication area, which would give greater credence to the theory transmitted. In one instance, the applicant's immediate supervisor in an I.U. Hospital Public Service Campaign had a doctorate in communication, and carefully articulated the educational procedures given her colleague. In a contrasting instance, laudatory letters were written by friends in the same capacity as the applicant, and it was an apparent case of the blind leading the blind--despite the entire group's seeming disillusionment with their vision.

Listing of documentation can include copies of programs, newsletters, and the like, helping to indicate the extent of the communicating done, and there can also be letters or other forms of favorable response to it.

There can be secondary and postsecondary transcripts included which can indicate courses taken in psychology, sociology, social psychology, supervision, business, and other areas related to the communication area for which credit is asked. With appropriate supplementary training, these can enforce the theoretical base.

These are only representative suggestions of what documents might be listed which corroboratively could establish a case for some experiential learning credit in communication.

REQUEST FOR CREDIT. This entry involves a brief capsulization of why a certain number and level of credits should be assigned. In it, the applicant summarizes a knowledge of the theories (and skills or principles) of a certain subject in light of the employment and/or training and/or other practical experiences noted in the portfolio.

There is reference to demonstration of that knowledge through certificates, transcripts, licenses, verification letters, and other affidavits.

Then the applicant gives assurance that he/she reviewed the description of a specific course, the text, syllabus and whatever else appears appropriate.

Finally, there is a request that credit be granted for either the specific course as listed in the catalog or the same number of general or block credits, e.g. under SGS 299.

The assessor can assign the course-specific credit, or any number of credits (fewer or more) under the block number. Or, of course, there might be no credits assigned at all. Further, to ease the pressure in terms of any more minor uncertainties, if credit is assigned, the grade of "satisfactory" is sufficient.

INTERNATIONAL ISSUES

Outside the United States, little effort has been made to grant credit at the postsecondary level for experiential learning. But in Europe there is a tendency to grant college admission to non-high school graduates on the basis of self-

acquired competencies. Peter F. Thompson cites a number of European countries that give systematic consideration to work experiences when admitting students to higher educational institutions. In some countries (e.g. Denmark and Sweden) work experience can be substituted for a secondary education certificate to gain entry into a tertiary institution. A similar policy has been established in Australia for "mature-age" entrants (Thompson, 1988).

Yet, once admitted there is little actual credit granted, although some isolated cases are occurring in the United Kingdom and elsewhere in which credit is provided for advanced academic or professional standing (Thompson, 1988). Speech communication courses are not among them, primarily because such courses, per se, are not a regular feature of European curricula.

Because of international language barriers, there are few prospects that foreign students who come to United States universities would apply for experiential learning credit in speech communication. Even if language were not a significant problem, U. S. courses have different cultural standards from those of other countries for what is thought of as effective rhetoric. For instance, the same style, organization, and credibility principles that are prized in some countries are evaluated much more negatively in the United States (Dick, 1989; Kaplan, 1987; Purves, 1988).

Koester and Lustig have noted that the "linear organization of speeches embodied in the requirement that

speeches follow a prescriptive outlining pattern is inconsistent with the prior training of students from such diverse cultures as Japan and Saudi Arabia, for whom indirect, circular forms of organization are most consistent with their native language and experiences" (Koester & Lustig, 1991, p. 252).

U.S. cultural values of individuality, directness, openness, informality, and equality are inherent not only to public speaking but to interpersonal and small group communication, interviewing, and other courses in many current "Anglo-centered" curricula in U.S. colleges and universities.

CONCLUSION

It behooves our profession to continue refining our criteria for evaluating experiential learning. This might appear to mean more problematic detail-work crammed into an already overburdened schedule. But our decisions could affect the further education, life-development, and careers of these adults. Let's be sure we judge them fairly.

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